Contact Lenses — A Hazard Under General Anesthesia In The Dental Office

David M. Sohn, D.D.S.*

There are many hazards associated with the administration of general anesthesia. Most of these hazards are well known.

It is the purpose of this article to call attention to the relatively new hazard of contact lenses which may cause serious damage to a patient's eyes.

Case Report:

A 22-year-old female was referred to the office for the removal of an impacted third molar with severe pericoronitis. Her medical history and physical exam were within normal limits.

An induction dose of intravenous barbiturate was given, and a nasal mask was placed to deliver a mixture of nitrous oxide and oxygen as a supplement to the barbiturate.

In the process of stroking the eyelashes and raising the eyelid as an aid in gauging the depth of the anesthesia, it became apparent on close observation that the patient was wearing contact lenses tinted to match the color of her irises.

Contact lenses are plastic lenses, ground and very finely polished to a specific lense prescription in the same manner as eye glass lenses. They fit directly on the cornea of the eye, and are a substitute for eye glasses. The plastic lenses may be color tinted to match the iris, making them almost invisible.

It is likely that under a general anesthetic such foreign bodies could result in injuries to the eye. Fortunately in this case no injury resulted. It is also possible that the contact lenses be dislodged or broken, and the dentist would be responsible for replacing them.

It is my suggestion that every patient receiving general anesthesia should be specifically questioned about the presence of contact lenses when taking a medical history. Failure to remove them may result in scratching, abrading, or lacerating the eye. Should this happen, an ophthalmologist should see the patient as soon as possible. If the lense is lost, the dentist must make sure the patient can see well enough to get home safely.

*Clinical instructor in Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery at the University of Illinois, and Research and Educational Hospital, 30 N. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60602